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ABSTRACT

Debate educators must evaluate the efficacy of debate in terms of its goals of developing reasoning skills and critical thought. Disputes regarding method, purpose, and style identify problems within debate that obstruct or confound its capacity to reach these goals. Research plays a critical role in the development of reasoning skills and the process of critical thought, both of which are threatened by the use of debate handbooks and by the specific structure of arguments frequently presented in competition. Debaters sometimes discard the logical systems that have served effectively in the past, leaving the activity devoid of methodical inquiry and logical reasoning. The proliferation of innovative case structures and often the resolution itself have contributed to the deterioration of methodical inquiry. Communication skills are a secondary but still important goal of debate. However, some delivery styles actually threaten the development of reasoning and critical thought. While students should never sacrifice articulation or image merely for the sake of speed, style should never be allowed to become a substitute for the persuasive appeal of clear and accurate reasoning. Debate does a better job of preparing students for real experiences and of teaching students to think for themselves than does any other subject in the public schools of the United States. However, debate educators can foster the development of these skills better than they are doing currently. (HTH)

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HOW WELL ARE WE MEETING THE GOALS OF HIGH SCHOOL DEBATE?

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Evaluation is more difficult for an educator than for many other professionals. A surgeon measures his success by the health of his patient, the industrialist by the quality of his product, and the CBS network by the Nielson ratings. The educator must rely upon less specific criteria. Educators examine the scores of standardized tests, evaluate the marketable skills of the high school graduate, and compare these factors to those from other educational systems.

Even using this imprecise data, educators were not surprised when a recent government evaluation of the public educational system concluded that this system had produced a "nation at risk."

As educators, it is vitally important to question our role in this crisis confronting the educational community. In the process of that investigation it is important to identify and evaluate the specific goals of our discipline, as well as the methods we utilize to reach those goals.

Blair Lybbert identifies the primary goal of debate as the process of developing reasoning and critical thought. These vital skills are virtually ignored by the objectives and methods of the average public school. H. Stephen Glenn, one of the nation's leading educational consultants, observed that "...today's students are struggling harder and achieving less because of teaching methods that require them to think like the teacher instead of thinking for themselves."[1]

As a method, debate surpasses many other curriculum areas in the development of reasoning skills. Marshall McLuhan maintained that the "medium is the message."[2] McLuhan recognized that the

procedure communicates as much, or even more than the message itself. Educators might paraphrase McLuhan to observe that the "medium is the method."[3] It is the method or process which students utilize that actually generates knowledge. It is not what students hear, or see or memorize that teaches. It is what students do.

Typical teaching methods most frequently ignore active involvement. In evaluating the standard teaching methods, educators Neil Postman and Charles Weigartner supported this philosophy.

> ...what is it that students do in the classroom? Well, mostly, they sit and listen to the teacher. Mostly, they are required to remember. They are almost never required to make observations, formulate definitions, or perform any intellectual operations that go beyond repeating what someone else says is true. They are rarely encouraged to ask questions... It is practically unheard of for students to play any role in determining what problems are worth studying or what procedures of inquiry ought to be used.4

Students in the average American classroom learn to do what the teacher wants them to do. They learn to supply the "correct" answer, and, in the words of Postman and Weigartner, they learn that:

> Passive acceptance is a more desirable response to ideas than active criticism.
> Discovering knowledge is beyond the power of students, and, in any case, none of their business.
> Recall is the highest form of intellectual achievement, and the collection of unreleated 'facts' is the goal of education.
> The voice of authority is to be trusted and valued more than independent judgment.5

Unlike teaching methods which suppress critical thought, debate is a real, legitimate learning activity. It is this activity, and not the teacher, which develops skills of critical

thought and reasoning. We can maintain that debate is one of the most effective learning methods in our educational system. H. Stephen Glenn commented that "The best subjects for training students for the future are forensics and debate...."[6]

Without the skills of critical thought and reasoning, systems produce students who avoid thought, shun the acquisition of knowledge and fear personal discovery. Our society demands citizens who evaluate information, investigate ideas and continue to explore new dimensions. Should the educational system fail to cultivate these skills we will confront a populace devoid of political ambition, dependent upon a central source of information and fearful of new discoveries.

There is nothing more important in American society than teaching children to think. There is no activity better suited for the development of this skill than the process of debate.

Compared to the educational community at large, we can easily conclude that debate meets the goal of developing critical thought and reasoning more effectively than any other discipline available to public school students. Although we hold a virtual monopoly on this teaching method, we should not permit ourselves the luxury of avoiding introspection. It is not enough to note that debate teaches critical thought better than other activities. It is important that we determine if debate teaches students to think as effectively as it could.

If we recognize that it is the activity of debate which achieves the goal, and if we further agree that as teachers and coaches our primary task is the development and supervision of that activity, it is critical that we evaluate the efficacy of

the activity in terms of the goals we seek to obtain.

The controversy surrounding our discipline is not new. Disputes regarding method, purpose and style existed in the ancient world. Protagoras, often referred to as the father of debate, and later Isocrates, developed some of the earliest theories of disputation. These ancient Greeks, our first speech teachers, were opposed by the philosophers such as Socrates and Plato who declared their practices to be unsatisfactory because

> ...(2) they were indifferent to truth; (3) they had an aversion to patient, sincere research; (4) they had a fondness for the jingle of words; (5) they stressed persuasion rather than knowledge; (6) they sought superficial immediate effects (approval of the crowd, winning...)7

These criticisms, although originally made more than 2,400 years ago are still frequently advanced against our contemporary discipline. Every debate teacher can attribute a certain amount of legitimacy to each of these criticisms, and offer as evidence his own personal antecdote. Haven't we all heard a debate in which participants were "indifferent to the truth?" Haven't we all known the competitor who had an "aversion to patient, sincere research?" Haven't we occasionally argued technique should take priority over the acquisition of knowledge? Haven't we, at times, recognized and perhaps even encouraged behavior designed not to enhance thought, but merely to gain the decision?

All of these assertions identify problems within our activity which prevent or confound the capactiy of the activity to reach its primary goal...the development of critical thought and reasoning skills. To the degree that we recognize, and yet tolerate these abuses within the discipline, we frustrate the

achievement of our goal.

Debate is a highly competitive activity. There is no other academic process that generates such intense competition. Unlike other competitive events, the winners are not necessarily those individuals who most effectively master the skills of critical thought. Partially as a result of tournament practices, some of the brightest and most analytical students come home from tournaments without trophies. In fact, it can be stated that on occasion, the trophy has actually reinforced styles and behaviors which are in direct opposition to the goal of critical thought.

We have seen, for example, the development of a philosophy which might be termed, "the end justifies the means." Recently I listened to a debate in which the negative team advanced an argument with an extremely low level of probability. Knowing the team members well, after the round I questioned the legitimacy of the argument. I also expressed my surprise that these well-informed contestants would utilize such an argument. The team responded with the rationale that they "threw the argument out to see if the judge would buy it". These young men did not seem to be struggling with the dilemma of truth versus practice. I suspect that they were somewhat "indifferent to the truth" and in search of those "superficial, immediate concerns" describe by Plato.

Our problem, as supervisors of this activity, is not what these young men did, but the fact that our discipline rewarded them for doing it. This team enjoyed one of the most impressive tournament records of any team in the state, yet they often

engaged in practices which debate coaches found to be questionable. The tournament seemed to reinforce those practices. The coach of these students complained that they had become "uncoachable", believeing that their many victories justified their debate practices. Perhaps debate tournaments tend to reinforce the wrong skills because, as forensic directors, we often leave the process of evaluation to individuals who may be more concerned with tricks and personalities than the adjudication of critical thought and reasoning. In the forensic community where I work, it is difficult to convince coaches to judge debates. They seem to prefer the comfort of the faculty lounge and the stimulation of circuit gossip to the judging process. When we leave the task of reinforcement to those who lack the training to recognize and the motivation to reward effective reasoning we bear the responsibility. As individual coaches and as a forensic organization, we need to become more involved in the adjudication process.

Research plays a critical role in the development of reasoning skills and the process of critical thought. Mr. Lybbert identified the academic skill of research and the development of academic rigor as the second goal of debate. It is intrinsically linked to the primary goal, for without investigation there can be no solid reasoning. Visual observations of our debate teams in tournament experience would suggest that debaters are meeting this goal of research more effectively than ever before. The team that staggers down the hallway with a dozen file drawers, storing thousands and

thousands of cards appears to be doing an outstanding job of research. Those of us on the "inside" know, however, that many of those cards are not primary sources discovered by the debaters. They are secondary sources purchased from colleges and universities and more recently, by the former debater turned entrepreneur who recognizes the opportunity for a "fast dollar" in exchange for some hastily gathered data.

Frequently the debate student only meets his evidence when he cuts it from the handbook and glues it to the index card. His "academic rigor" is measured by his cut and paste speed and the endurance he is able to demonstrate for the boring task.

I pose no opposition to specifically prepared texts on the debate topic. Indeed, I rely heavily upon such publications as Forensic Quarterly and the annual National Textbook series on the topic. I am not categorically opposed to the occasional use of the well-researched handbook. Those of us who live sixty miles from a library appreciate the access to major libraries that handbooks can provide.

Handbooks do, however, pose a significant threat to both research skills and the reasoning processes which we are attempting to develop. These books should be used for bibliography sources and as supplemental sources after the primary research facility has been exhausted. Students should never be permitted to rely on handbooks as the principle source of information. Perhaps our discipline fails to place the proper emphasis upon evidence. We tend to think that the winner of the debate can be pre-determined by the quantity of the evidence rather than the quality. We place emphasis on the number of the

cards read on the argument rather than the strength of the evidence and the reasoning which that evidence supports. When we permit our students to rely heavily upon handbook evidence, and when we reinforce the theory that quantity is a major voting issue, we deprive our students of an essential ingredient to reasoning and critical thought. When handbooks take the place of libraries, students are denied the opportunity of discovering the joy and excitement of personal research.

In addition to the ethical threat of "the end justifies the means" and the threat to individual primary research, the goal of reasoning and critical thought is threatened by a third condition relating to the actual process of argumentation.

I am concerned about the specific structure of arguments which I hear in debates. The essence of effective reasoning is the use of a logical system. Reasoning is the capactiy to utilize knowledge to make predictions and discover solutions. A supply of lumber will not make a man into a carpenter. A carpenter is a man who knows how to fashion lumber into a building. To achieve that goal, the carpenter follows a system or design. It is the system which creates the building. Similarly, the use of a system within the thinking process creates reasoning.

It sometimes appears that contemporary debaters have discarded the logical systems which have served us effectively in the past. At times debate seems to be devoid of methodical inquiry and logical reasoning. The New York Times recently described a team which maintained that:

> ...employment would lead to economic growth, which would in turn lead to a rise in population which would in turn increase carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, melt the polar ice caps and cause nuclear war.8

In defense of this rapid jump from jobs to nuclear destruction, one member of the team stated: "In this game, if you can't prove something will lead to nuclear war, you can't win."[9]

Debate teams seem to feel pressure to engage in this form of reasoning, and obviously, judges reward, and therefore, reinforce this problem. While such arguments may not always be absurd, they frequently lack the support or structure to justify the conclusion. They are often an absue of the logical system of deduction. I react with dismay to arguments such as this, and I am embarrassed for the students and the discipline when I witness these abuses. When our activity reinforces arguments which lack the structure of logical process we deny the efficacy of that process and endanger the goal of effective reasoning.

In addition to the disregard we demonstrate for logical patterns, contemporary debate also suffers from the absence of methodical inquiry. Such inquiry is threatened by structural practices within the debate process. Richard Whately observed that the most useful method of inquiry was found in the structure of three questions:

> ...first, What is the fact? secondly, Why (i.e. from what Cause) is it so? or in other words, how is it accounted for? and thirdly, What Consequence result from it?10

Observations of contemporary debate suggest that debaters have strayed from this simple and effective method of inquiry. Today's policy-making students seem to be overly concerned with "how" the resolution can be implemented while ignoring the issue

of "why" it should be done. This cart-before-the-horse process results in debate structures heavily weighted with insufficiently justified plan arguments. This method of inquiry endangers the reasoning process, because students fail to understand the causes of a problem and therefore lack the information required to implement and defend an effective solution.

At least two factors have contributed to the deterioration of methodical inquiry. The first factor is the proliferation of innovative case structures. The departure from the traditional needs case into the more popular comparative advantage case has made it easier for debaters to avoid initial research into cause. Policy system analysis theories also appear to permit the circumvention of cause. Debaters plunge into the process of arguing the comparative methods of systems without determining the necessity of changing any system. Certainly no one would suggest that all students adhere only to a traditional format. It would, however, enhance the method of inquiry and the reasoning process if students were required to pursue causality during the primary phase of topic orientation. Once they have engaged in this search, they are in a better position to advance to the more sophisticated case structures.

A second factor which interferes with methodical inquiry is often the debate resolution itself. In our attempt to narrow the topic for debate, we occasionally leap over the concept of problem-cause and force debaters into immediate policy creation. There is no better example of this situation than the 1984-85 debate topic on poverty. Communication from the topic selection

committee indicated that the general topic area was to encourage response to the question, "How can we best solve the problem of poverty?" The specific resolution, did not, however, reflect that question. In fact, the resolution answered that question. The resolution demanded that the solution to poverty was the employment of all employable poor. As a result of this situation, the majority of all debates centered not on the causes and solutions of poverty, but on work that should be accomplished. An uninformed observer might easily have assumed from listening to debates that the resolution was something like, Resolved: That the federal government should create jobs. The remediation of poverty was rarely an issue and almost never a central issue in the debate.

In the fall of 1984, I commenced topic analysis by requesting my students to quantify the problem identified in the problem area, determine the cause(s) of that problem, ascertain the impact of the problem and suggest solutions. The students followed this system of inquiry, but they located a problem with the assignment. Many of the proposals which they created to solve the causes were non-topical proposals. The resolution presumed that the cause of poverty was the absence of employment, and it forced that presumptive analysis upon the student. For the first time in my teaching career, I was forced to alter the method of inquiry. Rather than research the causes and then the solutions of poverty, students started backwards: they researched an area where work should be done, and they used poor people to do it. They met the demands of the resolution, but in so doing, they adulterated the system of inquiry which they should have used. When our styles and topics encourage students

to avoid initial cause analysis, we damage the capacity debate to enhance the reasoning process.

The final goal identified by Mr. Lybbert, and I suspect, the most controversial, is that of developing communication skills. Like my colleague, I recognize that there are many who would dispute the importance of this goal. Like Mr. Lybbert, I also concur that it is not so important as reasoning and research skills. But, to argue that it is a secondary goal is not to argue that it is an unimportant goal. It is merely to observe that if the central goal of a teacher is to develop communication skills, there are easier methods to employ than the process of debate.

Nevertheless, communication skills are an important goal, because without them the effectiveness of reasoning and research is lost. The process of persuasion demands that we research, reason and present the arguments in an ethical and convincing fashion.

The most frequent criticism of debate from "lay" individuals who observe rounds of debate is that students "talk too fast." That criticism is an over-simplification of the delivery problems within debate. Speaking rates have increased dramatically in the past fifty years. The slow and deliberate speech of the pre-media orator is now out of fashion. Televsion and radio advertisers have taught us all to listen "faster" as they continue to cram lots of words into little periods of time. Indeed, slow speech may actually cause the attention of the audience to wander and result in diminished credibility for the speaker.

A brisk rate of delivery, such as that practiced by network

news personnel, is not a threat to the communication goals of our discipline. "Brisk rate" does not, however, describe the debater who rises to the podium, shouts "ready, set go" and proceeds into a delivery mode that defies effective articulation, pacing and vocal variation in tone and rate. Even more than the muddled communication, I object to the impact such delivery skills have on speaker credibility. The debater who appears to be a raving maniac, with saliva bubbles foaming in the corners of his mouth, makes me uncomfortable. His sense of panic transfers to the audience and diminishes the impact of his reasoning. The New York Times recently reported that teams at the New York State Debate Tournament often spoke at rates in excess of three hundred words per minute. This article also noted that one team spent nearly forty hours each week rehearsing and developing this speaking rate.[11] Ultimately all educators must ask themselves how the skills they encourage will be used in real-life application. Unless the demand for the recent Federal Express motor-mouth ad increases to absorb most former debaters, there seems to be little practical application of a three hundered word-per-minute speaking skill.

Some delivery styles actually threaten the development of those primary goals of reasoning and critical thought. When the mouth moves dramatically ahead of the brain, it is more difficult to analyze arguments and debate them effectively.

Extremely rapid and inarticulate speech undermines the image of the speaker and the activity itself. I am always hesitant to invite a school administrator to listen to a debate. I am afraid that he will respond, as one recent educator did, in describing two

of the best teams in our state as "four little machine guns in basic training, rapid, jerky and almost completely inaccurate."

I would advocate a middle ground in style. Students should never sacrifice articulation or image merely for the sake of speed. On the other hand, style should never be allowed to become a substitute for the persuasive appeal of clear and accurate reasoning. As coaches, we have an obligation to train and to reinforce this type of delivery.

In summary of my response to the question, "How effectively are we meeting the goals of high school debate?", allow me to make these observations: First, the activity of debate does a better job of preparing student for real experiences than any other subject in the American public school system. Debate provides students with practical experience in the valuable skills of reasoning and critical thought. Debate encourages students to research subjects, formulate questions, and discover and test solutions. There is nothing more important than teaching people to think for themselves. There is no discipline which does this as well as our own.

Second, we can develop these skills better than we are currently. We can reaffirm our commitment to the pursuit of truth rather than merely success. We can encourage patient and original research. We can re-dedicate ourselves to the development and reinforcement of systematic thought and methodical inquiry. We can encourage effective delivery skills.

I believe the goals of debate are among the very most important goals within the educational framework. I am worried when I see these goals eroded by questionable practices and

behaviors. I am concerned that these practices may cripple or even destroy the capactiy of debate to train young people in the vital skills of logic and language, and I am convinced that individually and as an organization, we have a responsibility, not to the trophy or the tournament, but to the student and the integrity of debate itself.

NOTES

[1] "Educator Praises Good Ol´ Days," The Post Register, November 8, 1984, p. B1.

[2] Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 23.

[3] Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, Teaching as a Subversive Activity, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969), p. 19.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] The Post Register

[7] Karl F. Robinson and E. J. Kerikas, Teaching Speech, (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1965), p. 25.

[8] "Young Albany Debaters Resolve Who´s Best," The New York Times, April 28, 1985, p. 1.

[9] Ibid.

[10] James L. Golden and Edward P. J. Corbett, The Rhetoric of Blair, Campbell and Whately, (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 298.

[11] The New York Times